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March 17, 1976

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Syrian Intervention in Lebanon

The limited intervention of regular Syrian military forces in central Lebanon this week is a measure of President Asad's determination to arrest the deterioration in the security situation and to force a political solution on the Lebanese. The introduction of some 1,000 Syrian regulars, thinly disguised as additional elements of the Palestine Liberation Army and reportedly supported by some tanks, appears to have been a calculated gamble with three immediate objectives:

- to help fill the military vacuum created by the rapid collapse of the Lebanese army;
- to prevent the Muslim forces under Lieutenant Khatib from attacking the Christian forces defending President Franjiyah;
- to speed Franjiyah's resignation and control the selection of his successor.

Since Syria's leverage in Lebanon hinges on its potential to bring overwhelming military pressure to bear, President Asad apparently concluded that the presence of at least some Syrian regulars was necessary to reassert Syrian control.

DIA and DOS review(s) completed.

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He probably felt this was the only way to prevent a slide back into civil war and to get back on track implementation of the reform package that was achieved through Syrian mediation last month.

We believe that Asad is prepared to augment, in a controlled manner, the number of Syrian regulars in central and northern Lebanon if that is required to break the political impasse in Beirut.

The Syrian Rationale

The principal Syrian aim in Lebanon is to restore stability and achieve a political accommodation acceptable to both Lebanese Christians and Muslims. The Syrians believe that Franjiyah's resignation is necessary and they want to control the choice of his successor; but they are not attempting to deprive the Christians of the presidency nor are they prepared now to impose a Muslim-dominated government on Lebanon. In our view, Syria does not intend to try to annex Lebanon. On the other hand, the Syrians probably believe they do not have the option of abandoning their mediation efforts and allowing the resumption of a full-scale civil war. The Syrians have said repeatedly that they will not allow the partition of Lebanon, an almost certain result of a civil war.

The Syrian decision to inject regular forces was triggered by military vacuum created by the rapid disintegration

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of the Lebanese army. The army's collapse, the revolt of Muslim army elements led by Lieutenant Khatib, and the attempted coup by Brigadier Ahdab underscored the fact that there was no Lebanese force capable of providing nationwide security and enforcing the provisions of the political reform package worked out in February. Chief of Staff Shihabi told Ambassador Murphy last week that the Palestine Liberation Army was inadequate to provide security throughout the country, and the Syrians did not intend that the PLA remain permanently in Lebanon. In addition, the main Palestinian groups in Lebanon, Fatah and Saiqa, are not capable of maintaining security outside areas under their immediate control, are often at loggerheads, and are themselves a central issue in the Lebanese dispute. Moreover, Fatah is not directly responsive to Syrian control.

In addition to helping to fill the military vacuum, the introduction of Syrian forces was designed to reinforce President Asad's mediation effort. Asad apparently calculated that he could make no further progress through political suasion without bringing some sobering military pressure to bear. Moreover, he probably calculated that the Israelis--perhaps prompted by the US--would accept that his only goal in introducing regular forces was to stabilize the situation and achieve a political breakthrough. The Israelis, after

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all, had not overreacted to the introduction of the Syrian-controlled PLA in January.

Asad would have preferred, we believe, not to resort to such a high risk operation as the use of Syrian regulars. The dilemma for him is that he has staked considerable prestige in achievement of a successful Syrian mediation. Asad is generally regarded throughout the Arab world as the arbiter of Lebanon's domestic politics. He is concerned to preserve the enhanced stature he has gained through his efforts to date, and he wants to avoid giving additional ammunition to his critics, especially President Sadat.

Thus, despite his caution and his desire not to provoke an Israeli reaction, Asad seems to have concluded that some form of intervention by regular forces was a necessary risk to protect his heavy political investment in Lebanon and to preserve his Arab leadership credentials.

Syria's Next Step

The immediate consequence of Syria's action has been to stabilize the security situation--at least temporarily. Neither Christian nor Muslim forces are likely to attempt to provoke the Syrians by starting up the fighting again. Nonetheless, Syria probably will have to keep some regular forces in Lebanon, at least until President Franjiyah resigns. It is also unlikely that Syrian forces would be

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withdrawn entirely until there is discernible progress in reconstituting the Lebanese army. While both of these developments could occur rapidly, it is just as possible that there will be another period of sustained wrangling. We believe, however, that the Syrians took their action with the aim of forcing a quick breakthrough and we doubt that they would hesitate to bring additional pressure to bear if it appears the Lebanese are attempting to drag their feet again. The most likely form this pressure would take would be the incremental infusion of more Syrian regulars into central Lebanon.

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[REDACTED] we do not believe that the Syrians would augment their present action by positioning large units, such as the 3rd armored division, on the Lebanese border. Such a move would risk further alarming the Israelis. In any case, the stationing of additional regular forces inside Lebanon would be a more effective means of intimidating the Lebanese.

In addition, we do not believe the Syrians are likely, in present circumstances, to send armored divisions into Lebanon or deploy sizable Syrian units into the sensitive southern Lebanese-Israeli border area. Even though the Syrians have taken considerable risks thus far, the potential

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for an Israeli counter-action and thus a military confrontation with Israel on two fronts at the wrong time and over the wrong issues continues to be a major constraint against massive, direct Syrian intervention. The Syrians would, however, take such action in the event that Israel attempted to occupy southern Lebanon.

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The final possibility remains that somehow the Lebanese will manage to embroil themselves in a renewed civil war despite the presence of limited numbers of Syrian regulars. In these circumstances, we believe Syria would feel compelled to intervene on a still larger scale to impose a truce.

The Limits of Syrian Pressure

If Syria can force a political breakthrough, it is likely to withdraw at least some of its forces. We do not

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believe the Syrians want to become bogged down in a sustained police action in Lebanon. They probably would leave a substantial PLA contingent in place, however, until a reconstituted Lebanese army proved it was capable of maintaining adequate security. Eventually, we think Syria would withdraw the bulk of the PLA.

Over the longer term, there is no guarantee that any political accommodation the Syrians are able to achieve will take hold for a prolonged period. Syria will continue to have to play an active mediating role between the various contending political and religious factions. Barring a renewed civil war, however, we expect the Syrians to revert to their preferred course of relying on political suasion. Having demonstrated their willingness to intervene militarily when pressed, they could emerge with more political clout than before. If Asad manages to avoid provoking an Israeli reaction to his present gamble, the Lebanese will have to anticipate that in the future Syria will be willing to back its demands with military force.

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Israeli's Reaction

Although the Israelis are showing signs of increasing nervousness over developments in Lebanon, they continue to react with restraint.

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The Lebanese-Israeli

border is relatively quiet, with UN observation posts reporting only a few minor shooting incidents.

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Israeli leaders have played down the issue of foreign, including Israeli, intervention and have refused to comment on press reports that Syrian troops have entered Lebanon, except to say that the subject is "under investigation." Israeli military officers stressed in a briefing to the US Defense Attache in Tel Aviv, however, that all Syrian-based Palestinian forces are now in Lebanon and that any additional troops crossing into Lebanon would have to be Syrian. Defense Minister Peres told an interviewer shortly after Ahdab's attempted coup last week that Israel will remain a "passive

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observer" of developments in Lebanon. He warned, however, that any change in Lebanon that might affect the security of Israel's border or the safety of Israeli settlements would require "countermeasures."

Israel's primary concern under present circumstances is with the situation in southern Lebanon. ^{Any} decision to intervene is likely to depend largely on Israel's perception of the situation there as it might affect Israel's security. Peres told reporters in January that if the Syrians invaded Lebanon, Israel's reaction would depend on the security situation "along the northern border with Lebanon," suggesting that Israel would not intervene ~~even~~ if the Syrians sent some troops in as long as they stayed out of southern Lebanon and that area remained calm.

We believe the Israelis would ~~(probably)~~ send their forces across the border if the Syrians intervened in Lebanon with large armored units, if the Palestine Liberation Army ~~or any other outside Arab force~~ concentrated large numbers of troops in southern Lebanon close to the Israeli border, or if ~~the~~ fedayeen or leftist Muslim units ~~such as those of rebel Muslim leader Khatib~~ began ~~damaging shellings of~~ Israeli settlements or stepped up cross-border operations.

Any Israeli military intervention is likely to be confined to southern Lebanon. The size of ~~the~~ Israeli forces involved, as well as the duration and depth of the intervention, would depend largely on the nature of the threat perceived by the Israelis. Thus, if the Syrians intervened on a massive scale, the Israelis ^{be likely to} would respond in kind, send ⁱⁿ their forces ^{probably} as far as the Litani River and remain ⁱⁿ as long as the Syrians. If the objective ^{were} ~~is~~ to counter a terrorist threat, the Israelis ^{would} ~~are likely~~ ~~to~~ limit the size of the intervention force, the depth of its penetration, and the length of its stay. They would likely pull out of Lebanon after destroying the terrorist bases, ^{although remaining in} ~~except perhaps for~~ a few strategically placed locations close to the Israeli border from which they could more easily interdict terrorist operations.

The Other Arabs

The Syrian move into Lebanon--and indeed any larger Syrian military intervention there--is likely to meet little open opposition from the bulk of the Arab states. With the exception of Egypt and Iraq, which have their own axes to grind with Syria and will undoubtedly loudly decry Syrian intervention, the Arab states ~~in general~~ will probably express their concern in private but do little and say nothing openly

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to impede the Syrians. The Arabs generally recognize, again with the exception of Egypt and Iraq, that only Syria can effectively control the situation in Lebanon and; while they will not necessarily like the idea of one Arab state sending its troops into another, they will probably be willing to accept Syria's judgment that intervention is the only alternative.

The Arabs' chief concern, of course, is the possibility that a Syrian move will bring a counter-intervention by Israel. The Arab states, particularly the conservatives and the ones who would have to foot the bill like Saudi Arabia, will unquestionably counsel caution. But if it came to Syrian-Israeli hostilities, virtually all Arab states would come to Syria's aid with at least token troop support or financial assistance.

Egypt is a different case. Cairo has thus far remained relatively silent about the recent events in Lebanon, presumably because it is preoccupied with its difficulties with the Soviets and Libya, but it seems unlikely that this silence will last endure. The Egyptians have so convinced themselves that evil motives lie behind every Syrian move that they will probably denounce Syria's current limited intervention as a deliberate provocation. and would almost certainly not help Syria in the event of hostilities with Israel. The Egyptians would turn their propaganda guns on Israel and Syria equally. But having now virtually assured the permanent cessation of arms deliveries from the Soviets, they are in no position to risk warfare with Israel themselves, and they would probably take extreme care to avoid this eventuality.